

## Quinque 4: Consequences

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## Quinque 4: Consequences

Untitled Disclaimer: Everyone who has been on the show The Real Adventures of Jonny Quest belongs to HB and everyone you don't recognize belongs to me.

**\*\*Prologue\*\***

The year is 2015. The world as we know it no longer exists.

In 2003, Ezekial Rage launched nuclear bombs from China at Cairo, London, Moscow, and Tokyo. The targeted cities retaliated before asking questions. By 2005, the world economy had collapsed, and the United States government fell apart. The former superpower has split into two warring halves, Dulab and Zinja.

The new America is one of hardships and struggles. Warfare has decimated most of the population between the ages of 35 and 65 and has drained the continent of its natural resources. The young and hardy have quickly risen through the ranks to become the new leaders. They are strong, smart, and willing to do anything they have to if it means the end of the war.

Dulab, consisting of the former states of Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, South Dakota, and Montana, is dedicated to upholding life as they knew it before the war. They are led by Commander Bennett and Roger "Race" Bannon, men well acquainted with military expeditions. Zinja, made of the states of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Colorado, and Kansas, has fallen under the rule of a madman named Dr. Zin. Zin's ultimate goal is global domination, starting with the fall of Dulab.

The Dulabian's fight back courageously. They have organized Task

Forces composed of their best young freedom fighters. As Quinque, the most elite Task Force, Jonathan Quest, Jessica Bannon, Alexander Anderson, Ashley Ray, and Dion Jennings fight to defend and expand the Dulab territory against Zin. Quinque is passionately determined to resurrect the world they once knew.

#### **\*\*Quinque #4: Consequences\*\***

"He's gone? What do you mean he's gone?" Dr. Zin slammed his fist down on his desk.

The scientist standing in front of him nervously swallowed. "Dr. Zin, you know how Dr. Messiah sometimes locks himself away for weeks on end." Zin nodded. "And you know how agitated he became after the Apollo incident." Zin nodded again. "We all just thought he was hiding until he could work something out."

"And . . .?" Zin prompted.

"And Questworld is apparently being hacked into and so his assistant went to tell him. That's when we first realized he wasn't anywhere in the laboratory."

"Are you tracking him?"

The scientist shook his head. "He's blocking us."

"Have the hackers been taken care of?"

"Unfortunately Dr. Messiah is the only one who knows the passwords to some of the security files. We need some more time. At this moment, we know the hacker's approximate location, but not what he's looking for."

"Where is the hacker?"

"Somewhere along the Montana/Utah border."

"You're dismissed. If you learn anything, either about Messiah or about this hacker, come tell me. Meanwhile, I'll send some people to look for the hacker."

"Yes, Dr. Zin." The scientist bowed his head and then backed out of the room.

Dr. Zin swiveled around in his chair, staring out the window. Messiah had been acting oddly since meeting Apollo. Sighing, he rubbed his forehead. They had not been able to figure out who Apollo truly was. The boy had seemed to know his way around Questworld. And Jessie Bannon had recognized it immediately -- but then again, why shouldn't she? She had, after all, lived with Dr. Quest before the fall. A grin stretched across his face. He could still remember the day he had ordered his troops to bomb the Quest compounds. The only fatality from the attack had been Dr. Quest's son, Jonny . . . his jaw dropped.

Could it be? Everything made sense now -- why Bannon had hidden Apollo's identity so well, how Apollo had known of Questworld, and why Messiah had started acting strangely.

He started laughing as he reached for the phone to call his twin daughters.

\* \* \*

The old man paused before approaching the guards. He was nervous and the thought of seeing Race Bannon again terrified him. But he had to know the truth. He had to know whether Jonny really was alive or not. Taking a deep breath, he commanded himself to walk up to the guards.

"Can we help you?" The guard on the left side of the door stopped him. His nametag said his name was Orchard.

"Yes, I need to speak with Race Bannon."

The other guard, Sampson, raised an eyebrow. "And who are you?"

The old man almost started laughing hysterically. Who am I? Now that's a good question. For ten years he had known exactly who he was -- until he had seen Apollo's face in Questworld. At that moment, his whole world had shattered. Everything he had known, everything he had believed -- gone.

"Are you all right, sir?" Orchard looked at him with concern.

"I'm fine. Tell him Benton is here."

Confusion crossed both guards' faces, but Sampson nodded. "Hold on a moment, sir. I'll need to call up to him." He walked into the building.

While his partner was gone, Orchard studied the old man who waited patiently. No, he revised his first thoughts, he was not really that old -- not age wise at least. He just seemed old because he acted like he carried the whole world on his shoulders. Sooner than he would have expected, Sampson came back out.

"He'll see you, sir. Do you know where his office is?"

Benton shook his head. "No, I've never been here before."

Sampson inclined his head. "Then I'll show you the way."

A few minutes later, Sampson was knocking on Race's office doors. Immediately the doors swung open and Benton looked into the eyes of the one he had hated for the past ten years.

"It is you!" Race exclaimed, motioning for Benton to enter his office. "Benton. But how?" He closed the doors, allowing himself and Benton Quest privacy.

"I've just got to know . . . is Jonny alive?"

Race blinked. "What? Yes, Benton, yes, he is. But what about yourself? Where have you been?"

"I had amnesia," Benton said slowly. "I couldn't remember anything about my past. And then, three weeks ago, I saw . . . something that sparked my memory." That part was close enough to the truth --

Apollo's face had made him start questioning everything Zin had told him. "But Jonny is alive?"

"Yes," Race repeated. "Oh, but you wouldn't know . . . " Quickly, Race told Benton everything that had happened since the Quest compounds had been bombed. "We wanted Zin to think he was dead."

Benton closed his eyes. How well their ploy had worked. "Can I see him?"

"He's out on a mission right now. His team was sent to try and find out who Dr. Messiah is . . . but you wouldn't know who that is . . . "

"Recall them." Benton's voice was haggard.

"What?"

Benton stared at the table in front of him, afraid to meet Race's eyes. "Bring them back."

Race paused and his eyes narrowed. "You didn't have amnesia, did you, Benton?"

Tacitly Benton shook his head.

"Fur on a catfish, Benton!" Race exclaimed, reverting to the old phrase in his anger. "Did you really think I would just let him die? And what about Hadji? He was as much your son as Jonny was. Even if Jonny was dead, didn't you stop to think that your other son might need you?"

Benton drew in a ragged breath. "I wasn't thinking."

"That's true enough!" He dropped his head into his hands. "I can't believe this. You're Dr. Messiah. Do you have any idea how often your sons and my daughter have almost died because of your inventions?"

Benton stood up. "I came here to find out what I've found out. Jonny's alive -- that's all that matters."

"And Hadji? You don't care about him anymore? He's not your son any longer?"

"Look, Bannon, for ten years I thought that you had let my son die."

Race's face grew hard. "I've done everything I could for him since that day. I would never have just left him." He sighed. "Look, let me call Hadj and then I'll call Jonny. It's the least I can do." Reaching over to his desk, he hit the speakerphone button and dialed Hadji Singh's number.

"Sultan." Hadji's voice echoed throughout the office.

"It's Bannon. There's someone in my office you need to see. Are you free?"

"Yes, but I do not know how long I will be able to stay. I'm expecting a call from Quinque in ten minutes."

"Negative, Sultan. I'm going to call them myself."

"And you weren't going to tell me that? I am their coordinator."

"I'm telling you now, Sultan. They're being brought back to Columbus."

"What? When? Why wasn't I informed?"

Race took a deep breath. "Just come on up, Sultan. I think you'll understand when you get here."

"All right," Hadji reluctantly agreed. "I'll be up in a minute."

Race hung up the phone and turned toward Benton before calling Quinque. "For the sake of the friendship we used to have, we'll tell everyone you had amnesia."

\* \* \*

"This sure brings back lots of old memories, doesn't it, Caroline?" Jonny asked as they sped through Questworld on hoverboards.

"It sure does," Jessie agreed. "You know, I never believed we would actually see Questworld again."

"Dr. Messiah did a great job of building it," Jonny said.

"How are you two doing?" Ashley's disembodied voice floated across the landscape. "Find anything yet?"

"Nothing yet, Sandman," Jessie replied. "We know that Dr. Messiah rebuilt Questworld. But we don't know who Dr. Messiah is. It's hidden well."

"And Questworld is a big place to search," Jonny added. "It could take a while."

"All right, oh, hold on a minute." After a long pause, she continued. "Time for a change of plans. We've been recalled."

"What?" They both exclaimed.

"Bannon just called. He wants Quinque back in Columbus sometime yesterday."

"But we haven't finished this mission," Jessie argued.

"He said it isn't important any more. Apollo and Caroline, logging out."

"Bannon said what?" Jonny asked the moment he was out of Questworld.

Ashley shrugged. "I'm just the messenger here. Pudge and Stick are

already packing up our things."

"Did he say why?" Jessie wondered.

Ashley shook her head. "No."

Jonny and Jessie sighed and exchanged grim looks. What kind of trouble was happening now?

"All right, we'll leave in five minutes," Jonny said.

Quinque was currently an hour and a half within Utah. Taber, formerly a Zinja Commandant, had told them of the wired abandoned house. From there, Ashley had gotten them into Questworld. Jessie and Jonny had spent the past six hours wandering around, trying to find Messiah's secrets but to no avail.

"I'm going to go look around outside," Jonny announced. "The last thing we need right now is for some Zinja soldiers to stumble across this place."

"We'll finish up here," Jessie replied.

"I'll be right back."

Jonny stepped out of the door and looked around. Right off hand he did not see anything wrong, but a cold shiver made its way up his spine. Someone was watching the house. But who? It could be anyone from a member of the Zinja Guard to a wanderer looking for a place to spend the night. He made his way to the side of the house, looking for any evidence to support his feelings. Suddenly there was a small stinging sensation in his left shoulder. A confused look crossed his face as he pulled the dart out of his flesh. The world started to swing before his eyes. Instantly he realized he had to get back to the rest of the team. But before he could even take another step, he crumpled to the ground. Through hazy eyes he saw two women in black nearing. And then darkness pulled him down.

\* \* \*

Dion sighed and looked at his watch. "It's been ten minutes. I'm going to go look for him," he signed.

"I'm coming with you," Xander said, standing.

Dion turned on his watch, tracking their leader. "He's not very far away at least."

"But that still doesn't tell us why he hasn't come back. He knows Bannon wants us back in Columbus as soon as earthly possible."

Jessie raised an eyebrow. "Apollo's supposed to have a sense of time?"

Xander grinned. "Good point, Caroline. All right, Pudge, let's go." They both left the house.

Ashley and Jessie exchanged small grins and sat down, waiting for the boys to return with Jonny.

"What do you think your father wants?" Ashley wondered.

Jessie shrugged. "I'm not sure. It's sort of odd that he didn't say why he wanted us back in Columbus. And he knows this mission is important. If we can figure out who Dr. Messiah is, we might be able to . . . "

"Caroline?" Xander's voice interrupted them.

Jessie frowned and brought her watch closer to her mouth. "I hear you, Stick. What's going on out there?"

"Uh, Houston, we have a problem." They could tell Xander was worried even over the static from the watches.

"What's wrong? Did you find Apollo?"

"We found his watch."

"And Apollo wasn't attached to that watch?"

"Affirmative, Caroline. Apollo is gone. And we found a note."

"A note?" Jessie shook her head. "Never mind, Stick. Look around to see if you notice anything else and then come back."

"All right. Stick out."

Five minutes later, Xander and Dion walked back into the house. Jessie and Ashley both anxiously stood up as they entered.

"Did you find anything else?" Ashley asked.

Xander shook his head and silently handed Jessie the note they had found attached to Jonny's watch. Jessie unfolded the small piece of paper and read out loud what was written upon it:

Tell Messiah we'll be in touch.

Quinque exchanged uncomprehending looks.

"Dr. Messiah? What does he have to do with any of this? And why would we be able to tell Messiah anything?" Xander voiced.

Jessie shook her head. "I have no idea. But it's time to call my father." She plugged in the speakerphone and dialed Race's number.

"This is Bannon."

His voice immediately helped calm her. He would know what to do -- he always knew what to do.

"It's Caroline."

"Caroline? I thought I told Sandman that Quinque was recalled."

"You did. But we ran into a small problem."

"And what problem could Quinque possibly get into out in the middle of nowhere?"

Jessie took a deep breath. "Apollo has been kidnapped."

"What?" Race's voice rose in volume.

"We found his watch and a note."

"A note?"

"Uh huh." It did not take long to read Race the one line. "Do you have any idea what it means?"

There was a long pause. "You can't help Apollo from there, Caroline. Return to Columbus as planned."

"But . . . "

"No, Caroline. I think you'll understand when you get back. I'll expect to see Quinque in my office in thirty hours."

"Yes, sir. Caroline out." She hung up the phone and glanced helplessly at her teammates. "You heard the man. We're going back to Columbus."

\* \* \*

"What's wrong, Race?" Hadji wondered, noticing the dark look on Race's face.

Benton was in an adjoining room, resting. He had made his way from Austin to Columbus without stopping. Hadji still was not sure what to think about Dr. Quest's sudden arrival. How many times had he dreamed that his father was still alive? And now that he was back how come he was not as happy as he thought he should be? There was some kind of tension between Race and Dr. Quest that he just could not quite put a finger on. He wondered what had happened between the two of them before Hadji had arrived.

"Apollo has been kidnapped," Race replied.

Hadji's head snapped up. "What?"

Race smiled grimly. "Yeah, that was my reaction, too."

"Why?"

Sighing, Race dropped his eyes to his desk. "They found Apollo's watch with a note."

"A note?" Hadji knitted his eyebrows together. "What did it say?"

"'Tell Messiah that we'll be in touch.'"

"What is that supposed to . . .?" He trailed off. "He didn't have amnesia, did he?"



Race shook his head, still not meeting Hadji's eyes. "I was hoping you wouldn't have to find out."

"Why? I'm his son and he . . . just left me." Bitterness grew in Hadji's voice. "He left me when he thought his precious Jonny was dead."

"Hadji, I'm sorry."

Hadji threw a dark look at the door that led into the room where Dr. Quest was sleeping. "Yes, so am I." He stood and made his way to Race's door. "Tell him I never want to see him again. He is not my father."

He heard Race call his name as he closed the door, but he did not go back into the office. Right now he needed to find a tranquil spot to meditate and quiet his soul.

\* \* \*

Race dropped his head into his hands, hiding his face until he could once again keep his emotions under control. This day had tried him to the limits. And it was not over yet. Now he had to go tell Benton that Zin had figured out who Apollo was and had kidnapped him.

Opening the door, Race slipped into the dark room. He stopped when he saw Benton spread out on the bed that Race so often used himself when he needed a few minutes of rest. Memories of the first day he had met Benton rose up in his mind. Jonny had been six, Rachel Quest recently dead, and Benton had been wandering around hopelessly without direction. Race had helped him hold onto his sanity and they had become friends. At least Race thought they had. How could Benton actually believe that he would have let Jonny die? Hadn't he been assigned to the Quest family to help protect Jonny? How could Benton have thought he would abandon his job? Didn't he know that Race cared for Jonny like his own son?

He sighed and rubbed his forehead with a hand. Those thoughts were getting him nowhere. What was important now was to rescue Jonny.

"Benton?" Race laid a hand on Benton's shoulder. "Wake up."

"Race? What's wrong?" Benton sat up in the bed. "Is Jonny here?"

"No." Race shook his head. "Benton, Zin knows Apollo is Jonny."

"And . . .?" Benton raised an eyebrow. "I'm assuming there's something more to this story."

Race nodded. "Zin has Jonny."

"How?"

"I'm not sure of all the details. The rest of Quinque is on their way here and they can tell us more later."

"We've got to find him. Can you track him or something?"

"They took off his watch. Right now we don't have any idea where they are. But Zin left a note saying that they'll be in touch with you."

"He'll want to trade."

"I agree with you on that one, Benton. But the question becomes what are you going to do when they call?"

Benton's face was hard. "Anything I have to as long as I get my son back."

\* \* \*

Jonny slowly opened his eyes, trying to remember where he was. The last thing he recalled was going outside and . . . Anaya and Melana, Zin's twin daughters. He was lying on a hard floor, arms and legs tied. He struggled to sit up, but was still weak from the drug on the dart. His throat was dry and he wondered how long he had been out. Just then the door to his room opened and Anaya walked in.

"Hello, Apollo," she greeted, kneeling down beside Jonny. "How are you feeling?"

"Why do you care?"

Anaya smiled and laid a hand on his cheek, pushing back a lock of his blonde hair. "You sure have grown up." She leaned forward and kissed him on the lips. "Jonny Quest."

Jonny drew in a deep breath and pulled away from her.

She smiled. "Father figured it out just a little while ago." She traced the scar on his right cheek. "When did you get this scar, Jonny? I must admit, it makes you more handsome in a rugged sort of way."

"I suppose you could say your father gave it to me."

"When he bombed the Quest Compound?"

He nodded, not seeing a reason to hide the truth any longer. The game was, as they used to say, up. Zin knew his real identity.

"I can honestly say that I never thought to see you again."

"It's not everyday you think about seeing a dead person."

"No," Anaya agreed. "But I have a secret for you, too, Jonny." She put her mouth close to his ear. "Your father is alive."

"What?" He stared at her, not quite believing what she said.

"Sister." Melana's voice interrupted them. "It is time."

Anaya turned to look at her sister, who stood in the doorway. "Yes, sister." She cut the bonds tying Jonny's feet and helped him up.

They led him into a nearby room and motioned for him to sit down in a chair. Once he had complied, Melana coiled a rope around his chest. For the moment, though, his thoughts were not on his present situation, but on what Anaya had told him in the other room.

"Is it true? Is my father really alive?" He asked, looking at Anaya.

"You told him already, sister?" Melana sighed.

Anaya shrugged. "I never was any good at keeping secrets."

Jonny's mind swirled through the slowing effects of the drug. His father was alive.

Anaya dialed a phone number as Melana put a hand over Jonny's mouth.

"Bannon." Race's voice echoed in the quiet house.

"Hello, Bannon," Anaya replied. "I believe we have something you want."

\* \* \*

Six people anxiously looked at Race when he answered the phone. He nodded at Ashley and put the call on the speakerphone so that everyone could hear the conversation. Ashley quickly hit a button on her laptop, starting to trace the call.

"I'll need twenty seconds," she signed after the program had started.

"Anaya," Race greeted. "I suppose you're calling about some sort of trade."

"Yes," Anaya agreed. "Our young Mr. Quest here for his father."

The members of Quinque caught their breath.

"They know who Apollo is," Dion signed to the group. "But how did they figure it out?"

Jessie glanced at Dr. Quest, knowing the situation must be hitting him the hardest. His memory had just revived itself and he had come to Columbus only to find one of his sons in enemy hands. Benton sat in a chair by Race's desk, his head buried in his hands. Hadji, who Jessie thought would have been by his father's side, was standing on the opposite side of the room and was being unusually quiet, even for him. She sighed and rubbed her forehead. Quinque had only gotten back to Columbus thirty minutes earlier. They had all been awake for over a day and a half.

"Let me speak with Apollo," Race demanded.

"Come, Bannon, we don't have to play this ridiculous game any more. You can call him Jonny now. There's nothing left to hide. As they used to say before the fall, all the cards are out on the table."

Race's eyes flashed toward Benton and then back to the phone. "Fine, Anaya. We'll play your way. Let me speak with Jonny."

"Of course, Bannon."

There was a short pause.

"Race, is Dad . . .?"

"Jonny?" Benton stared at the phone as if it could show him his son. "Are you all right?"

"Dad . . . "

"Is that proof enough, Bannon?" Anaya's voice again came through the phone. "Or do we need to send you a finger?"

"Don't you dare harm my son," Benton growled.

"Dr. Quest," Anaya said. "You of all people should know how we operate."

Jessie's eyes narrowed. What did she mean by that wild comment? The other members of Quinque turned toward her with confusion in their eyes, but she could only shrug.

"They're calling from Kansas," Ashley signed. "Give me another couple of seconds and I'll be able to give you an exact location."

"What do you want, Anaya?" Race growled, waving Benton back into his seat.

"I want you and Dr. Quest to come to Maine. That's neutral ground so neither side should have to worry about any sort of covert operation. I will then call you and give you more directions. But if I see hide or hair of Quinque, no one will ever see Jonny again."

"Why do they want Dr. Quest so badly?" Dion wondered.

Jessie looked at Ashley and saw the same question in her eyes. Why did Zin want Dr. Quest? The note had plainly stated that they would be in contact with Dr. Messiah, but they now insisted on having Dr. Que . . . her face fell at the realization. At first her mind tried to deny the connection, but it was too strong.

\_Oh, poor Hadj\_, was her first thought. \_No wonder he's so depressed\_.

Xander suddenly gasped and Jessie met his eyes.

"Dr. Quest is Dr. Messiah," he said silently.

Race had caught sight of Xander's flickering fingers and he quietly cleared his throat to catch Quinque's attention. "That doesn't go out of this room," he ordered, using the same means of communication.

Quinque nodded.

\* \* \*

They world swirled sickeningly around him. Melana had given him something to drink -- something drugged. There was no need for them to worry about him trying to escape; he could barely keep the same train of thought for longer than two seconds.

Currently, Jonny and the twins were flying to Rockport, Maine. His hands were still tied behind him and he could not pull up the concentration to even begin to try and work his way free.

Jonny's thoughts twisted through his mind on random tandems.

. . . Maine, where it all began . . .

. . . fire, pain, Dad! . . .

. . . Dad holding up a flask of red liquid . . .

. . . Cold and shivering and alone in the mountains . . .

. . . Dad's dead . . .

. . . Spinning through the green vortex of Questworld . . .

. . . No, Dad's alive . . .

. . . Race grinning at him and telling him, "good job" . . .

. . . Questworld . . .

. . . Dad's alive . . .

. . . Dad is alive . . .

. . . Jeremiah Surd towering above him in Questworld . . .

. . . Dad is Dr. Messiah . . .

"No," he gasped, trying to catch his breath.

Melana, who was sitting in the seat next to him, laid a restraining hand on his arm. "Don't try anything, Quest."

. . . Josh's blood dripping off his hand and mixing with the dirt . .  
.

. . . Jessie's green eyes drilling into his soul . . .

. . . Hadji putting on his turban . . .

. . . Race shaking his head . . .

. . . Ashley sitting in front of a computer . . .

. . . Dion practicing karate . . .

. . . Xander reading Shakespeare . . .

. . . Dad is Dr. Messiah . . .

And then he fell unconscious, the drug catching up to him.

\* \* \*

Ashley watched her laptop as Race and Dr. Quest's signal grew further away. Quinque was following the two, regardless of Anaya's request, but made sure to keep a safe distance away.

"Why do you think they wanted to meet in Maine?" Ashley asked Jessie, who was piloting their plane.

"That's where it began," Jessie grimly replied. "This time around, at least."

"This time?" Xander asked. "There's been another time?"

"Think about, Xander," Ashley said. "Dr. Zin has been after the Quest family for how long, Jess?"

"He killed his mother," Jessie stated.

"What?" The three members of Quinque looked up at their temporary leader.

"Zin killed Rachel Quest, Jonny's mother. Jonny was six."

"Whoa," Xander breathed. "Why?"

"Revenge -- what other reason is there in Zin's mind? Can you just imagine how happy Zin was to see his old enemy working with him, his mind poisoned against my father?" She sighed. "I don't think he's completely sane anymore."

"And Jonny's going to come back to find his family torn apart," Ashley whispered.

"I was wondering about that," Dion entered. "Is Hadji going to hold this against Jonny? Is he still going to want to be our coordinator?"

Jessie shrugged. "I don't know."

\* \* \*

Jonny gazed around him. He had not been here since the mansion had been bombed. This is where his father had been killed . . . almost killed ten years ago. There, out on the cliff, he could make out the base of the lighthouse where they had spent so much time. And there, pieces of rusted metal from Race's prized car. For a moment, the grandeur of the Maine compound was built up before his eyes. Then he blinked and reality hit him. His throat tightened at all he had lost.

His eyes were pulled upward as a helicopter came in close to the compound and started to land, kicking up dust and dirt.

Melana slipped an arm around his neck and pulled out her gun, placing it against his right temple. They all stood silently as Race and Dr.

Quest stepped out of the helicopter. Jonny's heart started to race at the sight of his father. He really was alive!

"Jonny, are you all right?" Benton called.

"I'm fine, Dad." He could not stop the silly smile that covered his face. How good it felt to be able to say that. Dad.

Anaya scanned the sky, looking for another plane.

"We came alone, Anaya," Race said. "As you wanted. Quinque isn't here."

"Good." Melana gave him a hard smile and pulled the gun slightly away from Jonny's head. "Dr. Quest, please come here."

Reluctantly, Dr. Quest started toward the twins and his son. How long had he dreamed of seeing Jonny's face again? How long had it been since he last hugged him? Could it really have been twenty-three years since he had first held him in his arms?

When he was about three-quarters of the way to the small group, Anaya grabbed Jonny out of her sister's grasp and hit him on the back of the head with her own gun. Jonny wordlessly sunk to the ground, stunned. Angrily, Race and Benton both took involuntarily steps forward, ready to run to Jonny's side. But Melana had her gun pointed at Race.

"Stop right there, Bannon," she ordered. "Dr. Quest, please keep coming. You would like to see your son again, wouldn't you?" She sneered. "Unfortunately for you, Bannon, Quinque isn't here. They'll never know why you didn't return to Columbus."

Race's face tensed. "This was all a trap."

"Indeed, Bannon. Dulab will lose one of its leaders and Dr. Messiah will come back to Zinja. And Apollo knows so many secrets. Father will be happy to see him again."

"No," Benton whispered. "I won't go back to work for Zin."

"I'm afraid you won't have much of a choice, Messiah. Not if you want to keep your son alive."

Benton met Jonny's blue eyes. Eyes so much like Rachel's that they cut into his heart.

Melana's finger squeezed the trigger of her gun. Before Race could move, Dr. Quest jumped in front of him. Dr. Quest was jerked backwards and he landed heavily, blood flowing from his chest.

"Dad!" Jonny cried. He tried to scramble to his feet, but Anaya's arm held him where he was.

Just then Quinque rushed onto the scene. Anaya let go of Jonny to defend herself and Jonny immediately ran toward his father. Race was already beside him, pressing his hand against the wound.

"How many times did you take a bullet for me, Race?" Benton asked

wearily. "I'm sorry."

"Don't try to talk, Benton." Race's face showed his sadness. "You'll be just fine."

"Dad," Jonny whispered, kneeling down.

"Jonny." Dr. Quest reached up to touch his cheek. "I'm so sorry."

"Dad, you're going to be just fine. Stay still."

"You never were a good liar, Jonny." Somehow Benton smiled at his son. "I missed you. And I love you." His eyes closed.

Tears that Jonny could not wipe away ran down his cheeks.

\* \* \*

"Jonny, there's something you should know."

It was three days later and Race, Jonny, and Hadji were gathered in Race's office. There were a number of things they needed to discuss.

Jonny shook his head. "I already know. I figured it out when we were flying to Maine." He turned to look at his adopted brother. "Hadj, I don't know what to say."

"Then do not say anything, my brother." Hadji gave him a tired smile. "I am quite all right." He paused. "How are you doing, Jonny?"

Sighing, Jonny rubbed his eyes. It had been three days since Dr. Quest had died. "I've been better, Hadj. But I'll live." He met Race's eyes. "When's the funeral going to be?"

"This afternoon. Only seven people know that he was Dr. Messiah. And I think you boys would like to keep it that way."

Both Jonny and Hadji nodded. There was no need to mar the public's opinion of Dr. Quest. Before the fall, he had been a good man who had helped save the world time and time again.

Jessie entered into the room and they all looked at her. "Hi, I know you three wanted some privacy, but I found these and had to come give them to you." She held up three notes.

"What do they say?" Race asked.

Jessie shrugged. "I don't know. There's one for each of you." She handed them out and then left the office.

Race stared at the note with his name on it. "I think that perhaps we should each go somewhere else to read these."

\* \* \*

Race closed his eyes, sighed, and opened them again. The last words written to him by Dr. Quest still had not changed.



Race,

I made a mistake. I am sorry, but I know those three words can never be enough. I can't say why I started listening to Zin -- perhaps I was just too deep in my grief. If only I had listened to my heart, things would have been different. If only . . . I suppose there's no point in listing all the "if only's" that are running through my head. We can't change the past, no matter how much we would like to. All we can do is keep moving forward and try to patch up all the potholes we have created along with way.

It is ironic to think that our positions are switched. Now you are the one who is more important to the government. You are the one who should have a bodyguard protecting your back and your family. You know, I don't know if I ever thanked you for coming into my life. I know that neither of us were very ecstatic at the idea when you first arrived. But I like to remember that we soon became friends. We raised our children together, we learned from each other, and together we could do anything. The past seems like some wonderful and beautiful dream, doesn't it? It's hard to imagine that it was real. But the world has moved on.

Thank you for taking care of my boys. You have done a great job. I am proud of them both. I know that Hadji will probably never forgive me, but I still do love him. He is still my son. Please, for the friendship we used to have, keep watching over them. Be the father I never was.

Once again, I am so sorry, my old friend. I can only hope that someday you will be able to forgive me.

Benton

\* \* \*

Hadji sat down on the dirt floor. He had converted one of the bedrooms into a mediation room. Plants surrounded him and a small waterfall sounded in the background. It was a good place to rest his soul. And he knew that he would need its familiar comfort as he read Dr. Quest's letter.

Hadji,

I hope you don't start reading this note, and then decide to crumple it up and throw it away. Not that I would blame you if you did. I have wronged you beyond belief.

I took you from your native Bangalore, inserted you into my house, adopted you as my own son, and then abandoned you. No words can express the guilt I now feel. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I will repeat that phrase to you until the day I die.

I think I went a bit crazy that day. If you had told me the moon was made of cheese, I would have believed it. And then, when I never saw anything about Jonny's rescue, I could only think that Zin had told me the truth for once. How wrong I was.

I'm glad that Race has looked out for you. You have become more his son than you ever were mine. And I know this will probably mean

nothing to you, but I am very proud of you. You have grown more than I ever dreamed possible. You have become a great man.

Hadji, I truly do love you.

Be well,  
>Benton <p>

\* \* \*

Jonny sighed and sat down on the concrete bench outside Intelligence Command headquarters. Tears gathered in his eyes as he looked at his name, written in his father's meticulous handwriting. He still wavered back and forth between love and hate for his father -- love for who he used to be, hate for who he had become. But through it all, Dr. Quest was his father. He had hugged him, comforted him, ran to him in the night when Jonny had had nightmares, and most of all, had loved him. They had leaned on each other during the weeks after his mother's death. They had had no one else but each other. Not even Race's arrival had changed that. His throat constricted and he opened the letter with shaking hands.

Jonny,

My beloved son. For the past ten years I thought you were dead, forever out of the reach of my hands. I dreamed that you were with your mother. And then I saw you in my laboratory. It took me a while to realize why Apollo's face had suddenly started appearing every time I closed my eyes. I just couldn't believe that you were really alive.

I wanted to see you. I wanted to hold you in my arms and tell myself time and time again that you weren't dead. The only reason I came to Race was to find out the truth of that day. Even thinking about it now, it's still hard to believe that you truly are alive.

My son, I am sorry for all the pain I have caused you these past ten years. On that day when the compound was destroyed, Zin's soldiers dug me out of the ruins. From the stories I heard afterwards, I was near death. Zin's doctors worked on me for two days before I became conscious again. The first thing I did was ask whether or not you were all right. Zin, who had stayed by my side the whole time, told me of how Race had given up looking for you. That you were buried under tons of rubble. Possibly alive and certainly injured, but Race had no hope for your survival. I felt betrayed. I never should have trusted him. I should have trusted Race, like I always had in the past. I should have known that your luck would have kicked in and allowed you to live through the ordeal.

How many times have I tried to kill you these past ten years? How often have you become caught in one of my many traps? I can't believe I didn't know. I can't believe I never caught word . . . but I also know that was your intention. You didn't want Zin to know you lived. And that kept me from learning as well. But I still should have known. I was your father. I knew you as well as I knew my own soul. There were so many times that I almost walked out of Zin's lab and into Dulab, wanting to seek forgiveness from Race and Hadji. If only I had. Then I would have learned of you.

I love you, Jonny. And I have missed you so very much.

Your father,  
>Benton <p>

Jessie found him an hour later. She put an arm around him, holding him tightly as he cried for his lost father. Running a gentle hand through his hair, she comforted him, letting him purge his emotions and soul. After fifteen minutes, she ran a hand across his cheek, wiping away a few stray tears.

"You still need to get ready for the funeral," she said quietly.

Jonny nodded, not yet trusting his voice.

She kissed him lightly on the forehead. "He loved you, Jonny."

"I know." He closed his eyes for a moment, trying to get himself back under control.

Jessie stood and held out her hand. "Come, Jonny. Hadji is waiting for you."

He took her hand and sadly smiled at her. "You didn't have to come looking for me."

"Yes, I did." She returned his smile. "You're my friend."

They hugged each other and then turned to make their way slowly back to headquarters.

"Thank you," Jonny said as they neared.

"For what?"

"For being there." He squeezed her hand.

"Anytime, Apollo."

"Good afternoon, Miss Bannon," Orchard greeted. "Are you going to be attending Dr. Quest's funeral?"

"Yes," Jessie nodded. "All of Quinque will be there."

"Afternoon, Apollo." Sampson inclined his head.

"Good afternoon," Jonny replied.

Orchard held the doors open for them. Jonny started through and then stopped, turning to look back at the guards.

"Quest," he said with a small smile.

The guards exchanged confused looks.

"What?" Sampson asked.

"My name," Jonny clarified. "It's Jonny Quest."\_ \_

\_As Anaya said, it's time to stop playing games\_, he thought as he

walked into the building next to Jessie. \_It's time to stop hiding\_.

End  
file.